Cyber Charter Schools

Charter schools that take advantage of Internet-based educational opportunities—called "virtual" or "cyber" charters—were barely on the policy radar screen a year or two ago, but have since become a hot topic. At last count some 30 cyber charter schools have already been established in 12 states.

Proponents of cyber charters, including high officials in the U.S. Department of Education, point to a number of advantages these schools can offer the public school system. Most obviously, cyber charters leave behind the limitations of "brick-and-mortar" schools, making a whole world of educational experiences accessible to students at any time from any connected computer. These schools also greatly expand the range of educational options available to students and their families: for example, the concept is attractive to parents who are not content with their local public schools, but who are not able to home-school their children.

Cyber charters can also serve students who, for a variety of reasons, are not able to attend regular public schools, such as students who are homebound for health reasons, who are incarcerated, or who need flexible schedules (such as older students who are employed). In addition, cyber charters provide additional options to other students who, for a range of reasons, do not "fit" well in regular schools, such as highly creative students who have difficulty conforming to traditional classes and scheduling. At the same time, at least one cyber charter is actively recruiting gay and lesbian students who do not feel comfortable in regular schools.

Cyber charter proponents also note that these schools open up education to a wider range of people and organizations who provide instructional services. For example, cyber charters can offer multiple curriculum choices from a growing number of third-party providers and can even personalize the pace and content of instruction for individual students.

Operationally, a cyber school supplies students with a computer and instructional materials, and pays all telecommunications costs. The amount of time students actually spend on the Internet can vary widely, as some schools rely heavily on offline textbooks. Cyber charters may contract with local school districts, YMCAs, and other organizations to provide students with physical education, art, music, and co-curricular activities. All rely heavily on families to supervise their children's school work.

Like many innovations, this new form of public education is bringing with it controversy, unanticipated consequences, chaotic situations, and a flurry of audits and court cases. As *Education Week* puts it, "Rules for brick-and-mortar schools may not work in cyberspace." In addition, some educators worry that cyber students will miss the important socializing and educational benefits that come from interacting and working with other students. Others are uneasy about the potential lack of one-on-one or small group instructional time students might spend with teachers, and still others are concerned about problems in certifying the quality of instructors or instructional materials in a cyber world.

Following are several specific issues that have emerged with regard to cyber charters that policymakers may need to address in their state's charter school laws and regulations, most of which were probably drafted without on-line education in mind:

★ **Fluid Boundaries:** Most charter schools receive funding through the school districts in which they are located under the assumption that their students are drawn from that district's regular schools. By their very nature, cyber charters can enroll students beyond a district's boundaries (theoretically, beyond a state's borders). The host district is thus made responsible for the education of students out of its district, students it cannot physically monitor. Meanwhile, other districts

must provide per-pupil payments for students who are no longer under their supervision. One solution to this dilemma is to only grant charters for cyber schools at the state level and to provide direct state funding and oversight.

★ **Determining the Appropriate Per-Pupil Payment:** Despite the high cost of technology, online education can cost substantially less to operate because a bricks-and-mortar school building is not necessary to build and maintain, transportation and food services are not provided, and classes might have higher student/teacher ratios. School districts may balk at seeing "their" funds "unfairly" diverted to a lower-cost provider. The size of a school's enrollment and the range of educational options and support services offered can significantly affect per-pupil operating costs, making it difficult for policymakers to establish an appropriate per-pupil subsidy. From the cyber charter's point of view, the dollar amounts of the per-pupil payments it receives can vary depending on the wealth of the school district in which a student resides.

★ **Students New to Public Education:** Unlike other charter schools, students "attending" a cyber charter do not travel to a building, but work most of the time from their homes under parental supervision. This blurs the distinction between traditional public education and home schooling. A recent study found that 56 percent of cyber charter students in Pennsylvania, the state with the greatest number of these schools, had formerly been home schooled. These students' educational costs were not previously covered by public dollars and are an unexpected financial encumbrance to the districts in which the students reside.

★ **Accountability:** Accountability for student performance is difficult to measure and enforce among charter schools in general. Additional challenges with cyber charters include confirming enrollment figures, accounting for students' required instructional hours ("seat time"), and authenticating that students themselves, not their parents, are doing the schoolwork and taking the tests. Most cyber charters contract with for-profit operators of online courses,

and charges of corruption and conflict of interest have occasionally surfaced. None of these problems are insurmountable, but need to be addressed.

★ **Educational Quality:** Online education in general raises many questions about its effectiveness, issues that were explored at length by the 2001 NASBE Study Group on e-Learning. The Pennsylvania study found that the quality of instruction and the degree of student support provided in seven cyber charters varied considerably. States need to implement oversight measures to assure that cyber charters employ instructional and assessment methods that reflect best practices.

Resources

The report of the 2001 NASBE Study Group on e-Learning, *Any Time Any Place, Any Path, Any Pace: Taking the Lead on e-Learning Policy*, synthesizes what is known to date about a full range of policy issues concerning online learning in general. Download it from www.nasbe.org/e_Learning.html.

The Pennsylvania Department of Education commissioned KPMG Consulting to prepare a comprehensive study of the state's cyber charters. The October 2001 report, "Cyber Charter Schools Review," includes information on seven cyber schools and specific recommendations to improve the academic and financial accountability of the schools. The report has been criticized for relying on self-reported data and not including the state's largest and most controversial cyber school, but it provides the best information to date on this new phenomenon. Find the report online at www.pde.state.pa.us/charter_schools/cwp/view.asp?a=3&Q=75169.

Education Week is tracking this issue. See, for example, "Cyber Schools Carving Out Charter Niche" (October 24, 2001).

The Education Commission of the States (ECS) has compiled a selection of useful resources addressing charter school accountability in general online at www.ecs.org/html/IssueSection.asp?issueid=20.